

FERNANDE DECRUCK AND PAULE MAURICE: COMPARING MUSICAL ELEMENTS
OF TWO COMPOSITIONS FOR SAXOPHONE BY 20TH-CENTURY FEMALE FRENCH
COMPOSERS

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Introduction

Most of the standard repertoire for classical saxophone was written in the first half of the 20th century. The efforts of saxophonists Marcel Mule, Cecil Lesson, and Sigurd Rascher were fundamental to the development of this repertoire; however, Mule's influence in the development of the repertoire and style of playing set him apart.

Having established a successful career as a performer, Mule was appointed to be the Professor of Saxophone at the Paris Conservatory in 1942. There he began to collect and commission pieces for the students in his saxophone class; and as a result, many of the composers that wrote for saxophone at that time studied composition at the Paris Conservatory. Among the more noteworthy composers who wrote for saxophone were two French female composers: Fernande Decruck and Paule Maurice.

Decruck and Maurice both studied at the Conservatory. One of the leading teachers at the Conservatory was another French female composer, Nadia Boulanger. The music for saxophone written by Decruck and Maurice is considered part of the standard saxophone repertoire and is frequently performed and recorded. There are other female French composers who wrote music for Mule; but the selection of works by Decruck and Maurice for this pages is a result of the similarities of their compositions and careers.

In order to compare their work, a representative multi-movement piece from each composer will be addressed. The compositional style and musical influences of Decruck and Maurice in *Sonate en ut# pour saxophone alto (ou alto) et orchestre* by Fernande Decruck, and *Tableaux de Provence* by Paule Maurice will be examined. Additionally, basic biographical, educational and career information will provide context for these compositions.

With some exceptions, female composers have not often had a prominent role in the literature for any specific instrument. Regarding Decruck and Maurice, the sociopolitical climate in France during the first half of the 20th century made it possible for two female composers to make an indelible mark on the saxophone repertoire.

Fernande Decruck and her *Sonate en ut# pour saxophone alto (ou alto) et orchestra*

Fernande Decruck was born on December 25, 1896, in Gaillac, France. She began her studies at the Toulouse Conservatory and later was accepted into the Paris Conservatory.¹ During her first two years as a student, renowned French composer Gabriel Fauré was the director of the Paris Conservatory. His compositional philosophies and concept of harmony had a profound impact on Decruck's compositional style.² As a teaching assistant in Jean Gallon's harmony class, Decruck observed the development of composers Olivier Messiaen³ and Jacques Ibert.⁴

Of the two pieces being examined, Decruck's Sonata in C# was the earlier composition, written around 1943.⁵ The year of composition varies from 1942 to 1944 depending on the source.⁶ Only in the last thirty years has this work become part of the standard repertoire. It is now one of the most frequently performed and recorded sonatas for saxophone. Despite the fact that Decruck wrote the piece for Marcel Mule, Mule never recorded the entire Sonata.⁷

Having not recorded Decruck's Sonata could be part of the reason why the work was not performed as much as many of the other works written for Mule. Moreover, a longstanding lack of awareness of the piece has resulted in a shortage of scholarly information about Decruck and her works for saxophone.⁸ While some information may be obtained, it is often found to be limited and, at times, contradictory. The renewed interest in Decruck's Sonata has resulted in a recent surge of scholarly research; however, extant research remains limited.

¹ Helene Decruck, "Biography," *Fernande Decruck: The Life and Work of Fernande Breilh-Decruck*, trans. and rev. Matthew Welz Aubin, 2004, www.fernandedecruck.com/biography.

² Joren Cain, "Rediscovering Fernande Decruck's Sonate En Ut# Pour Saxophone Alto (ou Alto) Et Orchestre: A Performance Analysis" (DMA diss., University of North Texas, 2010), 8, digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc28401/m1/1/.

³ Nicolas Prost, "A la découverte de Fernande Decruck," saxiana.free.fr/decruck.pdf.

⁴ Cain, "Rediscovering Fernande Decruck," 7.

⁵ Decruck, "Biography."

⁶ Cain, "Rediscovering Fernande Decruck," 3–4.

⁷ Ibid., 30.

⁸ Ibid., 2.

At the time when the Sonata was written, many pieces were dedicated to Mule because of his skills as a saxophonist and his recent appointment as the Professor of Saxophone at the Paris Conservatory. Mule's recording of *Andante et Fileuse* (a short piece by Decruck) on the LP *Le Saxophone*, Vol. 1, displays his awareness of the composer.⁹ This recording is worth noting given that, according to Eugene Rousseau (a student of Mule and author of his biography), compositions written for Mule were so many that Mule could not perform, or even learn, all of them.¹⁰

Andante et Fileuse closely resembles the Sonata in both melodic material and scoring for the piano. The piano accompaniment in the Andante section is very similar to some of the sections of the second movement of the Sonata; however, the melody in the second movement of the Sonata is entirely different. The melody in the second movement of the Sonata was adapted from a fifteenth-century French carol.¹¹ The Fileuse section is almost identical to the Sonata's third movement, with only the ending of the movement being different.

In addition to Mule's recording of *Andante et Fileuse*, he also premiered an orchestrated a version of *Chant Lyrique Op. 69* in 1938 at Toulouse (Figure 1). This premiere was given on a concert that also included a composition by one of the students she observed—Jacques Ibert. That concert proved to be a significant achievement for Decruck in that the premiere of *Chant Lyrique Op. 69* was the first work by a female composer to be programmed by the *Orchestre de la Garde Républicaine*.¹²

⁹ Cain, "Rediscovering Fernande Decruck," 30.

¹⁰ Eugene Rousseau, *Marcel Mule: His Life and the Saxophone* (Shell Lake: Etoile, 1982), 31.

¹¹ Cain, "Rediscovering Fernande Decruck," 42.

¹² Decruck, "Biography."

Figure 1. Program from Marcel Mule's premiere performance of the orchestrated version of *Chant Lyrique*, Op. 69 in 1938 at Toulouse.



Helene Decruck, "Biography," <http://www.fernandedecruck.com/biography>.

Before collaborating with Mule, there was another saxophonist who worked with Fernande Decruck—her husband Maurice Decruck. Together, they wrote a method book for saxophone. *L'Ecole moderne du saxophone*, written by the Decrucks was published in 1932.¹³ At that time, saxophone was not taught at the Paris Conservatory; but the instrument was growing in popularity, creating a larger market for resource materials such as that which the Decrucks wrote together.

¹³ Nicolas Prost, "A la découverte de Fernande Decruck," <http://saxiana.free.fr/decruck.pdf>.

In addition to her work as a composer, Fernande Decruck was also a dedicated pianist and organist. In 1928, the Decrucks moved to New York due to Maurice Decruck winning a position as principal double bassist of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra under the direction of Arturo Toscanini.¹⁴ After the Decrucks moved to the United States, Fernande Decruck gave recitals frequently and was praised for her ability to improvise at the organ.¹⁵

The Sonata for saxophone comes from the period of Fernande's career when she was more devoted to composition. Compared to her earlier compositions for the saxophone like *The Golden Sax* (written in 1934 and dedicated to Rudy Wiedoeft¹⁶) the Sonata is a larger work that displays a maturation of both harmonic and melodic language. Interestingly, Decruck's compositions written around the time she studied at the Paris Conservatory do not show the harmonic influence of her teacher Gabriel Fauré as much as the later compositions like the Sonata.

Similar to the sonatas of Fauré, Decruck's Sonata for saxophone uses a traditional form. Despite her adherence to traditional form, Decruck writing displays innovative harmonic and tonal concepts like not considering 7th and 9th chords dissonant, and harmonies defined by phrases and not by individual chords.¹⁷ The title only indicates that the work is in C#, it does not indicate whether or not the tonal center is C# major or minor. The detailed harmonic analysis found in Joren Cain's dissertation investigates the style of Decruck's use of harmony. The

¹⁴ Decruck, "Biography."

¹⁵ Prost, "A la découverte."

¹⁶ Cain, "Rediscovering Fernande Decruck," 21.

¹⁷ Jean-Michel Nectoux, "Fauré, Gabriel," *Grove Music Online*, www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000009366.

composer not only changes freely between modes, she also uses polytonality, pandiatonicism, static harmonies, and non-functional harmonies.¹⁸

Decruck's harmonic concepts indicate the significant influence of not only her teacher, but also other prominent French composers like Debussy and Milhaud. The use of fast runs, static harmonies, non-functional harmonic relations, and the use of various modes are techniques often attributed to the music of Debussy.¹⁹ Decruck's use of polytonality is evident in the fourth movement of the Sonata. This movement contains large sections where the piano plays C major in the right hand and Db Major in the left hand.²⁰ There are also several instances of the saxophone playing in a different key than the accompaniment heard in the piano (or orchestra). Polytonality was a trademark of many of Darius Milhaud's compositions.²¹

Another technique Decruck used was that of synthetic scales. These scales are derived from collections of pitches from two separate chords. In example 1, the scale played in unison by the saxophone and the piano is built from a G-minor chord (G, Bb, D) and an F#-minor chord (F#, A, C#)—this is only one of many instances of Decruck using a synthetic scale in her Sonata for saxophone.²² In summary, her music is considered tonal; however, her concept of tonality was, at the time, more modern and defined by newer compositional techniques.

¹⁸ Cain, "Rediscovering Fernande Decruck," 37–39.

¹⁹ François Lesure and Roy Howat, "Debussy, (Achille-) Claude," *Oxford Music Online*, www.oxfordmusiconline.com/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000007353

²⁰ Cain, "Rediscovering Fernande Decruck," 39.

²¹ Jeremy, Drake, "Milhaud, Darius," *Oxford Music Online*, www.oxfordmusiconline.com/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000018674.

²² Cain, "Rediscovering Fernande Decruck," 63–64.

EXAMPLE 1. Movement I measures 41–42



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Paule Maurice's *Tableaux de Provence*

Paule Maurice was born in Paris on September 29, 1910.²³ Thanks to her autobiography, we know that she attended the Paris Conservatory, studied composition with Jean Gallon, and became his teaching assistant.²⁴ Maurice also taught at the *École Normale de Musique de Paris*. Some of her most talented students became professors at the Paris Conservatory and won the Grand Prix de Rome.²⁵

The similarities between the lives and careers of Decruck and Maurice include that they were both married to a musician. Paule Maurice was married to composer Pierre Lantier. Together they wrote a treatise on harmony entitled *Complement du Traite d'Harmonie de Reber*.²⁶

Unlike Decruck, the information available about the composer's life and details about *Tableaux de Provence* come from documents written by Paule Maurice. Her correspondence

²³ Anthony Jon Moore, "Who is Paule Maurice? Her Relative Anonymity and Its Consequences," (MA thesis, Florida Atlantic University, 2009), 3, <http://fau.digital.flvc.org/islandora/object/fau%3A2814>.

²⁴ Paul Bro, et al. "Paule Maurice Biography," *Topics, SaxAmE*, www.saxame.org/topics/maurice2/mauricetopic1.html.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

with saxophonists Jean-Marie Londeix and Marshall Taylor, and her notes about the composition provide both clarity and valuable insight.

The majority of *Tableaux de Provence* was written between 1952 and 1955, with the exception of the last movement “Le Cabridan,” which was composed in 1948.²⁷ *Tableaux de Provence* was dedicated to Marcel Mule, who knew Maurice and Lantier personally. Pierre Lantier, in preparation for an examination, took saxophone lessons with Marcel Mule; and as a result, Mule came to know Paule Maurice.²⁸

Mule’s influence on the piece can be seen in the articulations included in the manuscript of the fifth movement. Paule Maurice, doubting her ability to write the most effective articulations, requested that Mule add them to the final version of the work.²⁹ When saxophonist Marshall Taylor studied the piece with Mule, Mule indicated that the articulation can be changed in order to be able to play the movement at a faster tempo.³⁰

Different from the Sonata, Mule recorded *Tableaux de Provence* in its entirety on the LP *Le Saxophone, vol 6*.³¹ The complete work was premiered by Jean-Marie Londeix in 1958 with piano.³² Londeix gave the orchestral premiere in Brest, France under the baton of Pierre

²⁷ Paul Bro, et al., “Paule Maurice to Jean-Marie Londeix – November 29, 1960,” *Letters, SaxAmE*, www.saxame.org/letters/maurice/maurice4.html.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Anthony Jon Moore, “Marshall Taylor: Letter from Paule Maurice,” *Paule Maurice*, www.paulemaurice.com/id1.html.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ “Marcel Mule’s Discography,” *Saxophone Journal*, www.dornpub.com/saxophonejournal/mulediscography.html.

³² Paul Bro et al., “Poster for Premiere,” *Topics, SaxAmE*, www.saxame.org/topics/maurice2/mauricetopic4.html.

Lantier.³³ Over the next few years, Londeix also performed the work with several orchestras in France at Bordeaux and La Rochelle.³⁴

Tableaux de Provence is a highly programmatic work. Each movement represents a different scene from Provence, a region in the south of France. The title reflects Maurice's personal interest in the folk tradition of Provence and her profound memories of time spent there. Maurice and Lantier spent their summers in Provence for more than 25 years.³⁵ The five movements of the piece are entitled "Farandole of the Young Women," "Song for my Love," "The Bohemian Woman," "A Sigh for the Souls of the Alyscamps," and "The Bumblebee."³⁶

In the program notes written by the composer, she briefly describes the inspiration for each movement, and also discusses some of the compositional elements used in the piece. The Farandole is a dance from Provence.³⁷ The first movement is written in the hypolydian mode, and it is supposed to express the joys of youth.³⁸ The second movement starts with the piano playing tuning pitches of the guitar, which later evolve into an accompaniment based on a serenade. The rhythmic third movement expresses a fiery gypsy temperament.³⁹

In a letter from Maurice to Londeix, she explains that the fourth movement contains, without any doubt, the most profound emotional content in the work. Maurice wrote the fourth movement in the two days following the death of her husband's cousin. Maurice wrote to

³³ Paul Bro et al., "Tableaux de Provence Program Notes by the composer," *Topics. SaxAmE*, <http://www.saxame.org/topics/maurice2/mauricetopic2.html>

³⁴ Bro, "Paule Maurice to Jean-Marie Londeix – March 18, 1960," *Letters, SaxAmE*, www.saxame.org/letters/maurice/maurice2.html.

³⁵ Bro, "Paule Maurice to Jean-Marie Londeix – November 29, 1960."

³⁶ Claude Delangle, *A la Française*, notes by Marie-Laure Ragot, BIS-CD-1130, 2002, quoted in Moore, "Who is Paule Maurice," 35.

³⁷ "Farandole," *Oxford Music Online*. www.oxfordmusiconline.com/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000009298.

³⁸ Bro, "Tableaux de Provence Program Notes."

³⁹ *Ibid.*

Londeix that this death felt particularly cruel to her and her husband. This profound effect on Maurice was due in part to the fact that Maurice and Lantier spent many summers in Provence with Lantier's cousin.⁴⁰

The final movement represents the flight of the bee. Rapid, agitated figures of perpetual motion are repeated in canon with the accompaniment throughout the movement.⁴¹ The fast runs of notes that move between the saxophone and accompaniment are interrupted only by the cadenza. The cadenza was added by Mule's request, who found the movement too easy.⁴²

Regarding the harmony of the piece, the opening section of the first movement contains some of the compositional techniques used by Maurice in *Tableaux de Provence*. This opening indicates the influence of her time at the Paris Conservatory through its use of modality, polytonality, and static harmony.

For the first twelve measures, the left hand of the piano sustains a pedal C, with a bass ostinato that alternates between B-natural and B-flat (example 2). Alternating between the B-natural and the B-flat is one example of not only static harmony but also of her use of modality.

Example 2. Opening measures of the first movement Farandole of the Young Women

The musical score shows the opening measures of the first movement. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 152. The piano part features a bass ostinato alternating between B-natural and B-flat in the left hand, while the right hand plays a rapid, agitated figure. The saxophone part is mostly rests.

© 1990 by Editions Henry Lemoine, Paris. Paule Maurice.

⁴⁰ Bro, "Paule Maurice to Jean-Marie Londeix – November 29, 1960."

⁴¹ Bro, "Tableaux de Provence Program Notes."

⁴² Ibid.

From measures nine to eleven (example 3), the melody played in the right hand of the piano outlines an F# seventh-chord while the right hand is still playing the B-natural to B-flat ostinato and pedal on C. This collection of pitches can be arranged into two chords: a C-Major seventh-chord (C, E, G, B) and an F#-dominant seventh-chord (F#, A#, C#, E). This example showcases Maurice's use of polytonality.

Example 3. Measures 6–11, Farandole of the Young Women



© 1990 by Editions Henry Lemoine, Paris. Paule Maurice.

Comparable Elements in Sonata in C# and Tableaux de Provence

There are many similarities between these two compositions and the lives of Paule Maurice and Fernande Decruck. Both composers were married to musicians that played saxophone at some point in their life. Each composer collaborated with their spouse in writing a pedagogical text. Decruck and Maurice both attended the Paris Conservatory during the first half of the twentieth century. They each studied and assisted Jean Gallon at the Paris Conservatory. This had a big impact on their development as composers. Studying with Gallon, and its impact on their compositional style is evident in the many similarities shared by their compositions.

Regarding the specific pieces discussed, both were dedicated to Marcel Mule, despite only one of them being recorded by Mule. Each of these multi-movement compositions were

composed over the course of several years. Coincidentally the fast movements of both compositions, “Fileuse” and “Le Cabridan”, were written first and the additional movements were added later. From a performers perspective, both works pose many technical and expressive challenges. To some degree the Sonata could be considered a more demanding work.

The harmonic language of these pieces is very interesting to compare. Both pieces can be categorized as tonal within the context of music in the first half to the 20th century. They both feature polytonality, modal harmony, static harmonies, and non-functional chord progressions. Moreover, they both found inspiration in folk music and traditions.

One major difference in the careers of Fernande Decruck’s and Paule Maurice is that Decruck was a well-established performer and improviser that frequently gave recitals. Decruck’s career differed from that of Maurice in many ways. She lived in Paris, New York, and Toulouse; and at different points in her life had jobs that focused on various aspects of music making.⁴³ Maurice on the other hand was a professor of theory and composition at the *École Normale de Musique de Paris* for most of her life.

The documentation surrounding the compositions is also different. There is very little extant research on Decruck’s Sonata. Many questions about its composition remain unanswered and give room for much speculation.⁴⁴ There is a version for viola written by Decruck; however, there is not enough information to determine if Decruck originally conceived the piece for saxophone or viola.

On the other hand, *Tableaux de Provence* is a well-documented composition. We know that Mule had some input during the composition stage of the piece—mostly the articulations

⁴³ Decruck, “Biography.”

⁴⁴ Cain, “Rediscovering Fernande Decruck,” 27.

and the cadenza of the last movement. There is also information about the first performances and recordings of the piece by Londeix and Mule. Also, while Mule and Decruck knew one another, Mule had a close personal relationship with Maurice and Lantier that spanned many years.

One major difference between the two pieces is that Mule decided to record *Tableaux de Provence*. This choice played a major role in how well-known each piece was to saxophonists. Around the time these pieces were composed, classical saxophone was starting to develop in France and around the world. The recordings of Mule playing *Tableaux de Provence* resulted in it being a much more popular work than Decruck's Sonata in the years after they were composed.

It is not a coincidence that renowned saxophonists Eugene Rousseau and Frederick L. Hemke recall hearing recordings of Mule as teenagers; and describe it as a profound experience in their life.⁴⁵ It is interesting how recordings played such an important role in the development of classical saxophone, something unique to saxophone when compared with other instruments.

Finally, it is possible that elements different than the music itself had an influence on Mule's decision of recording *Tableaux de Provence* and not the Sonata. The consequence of this decision was that *Tableaux de Provence* became a well-known composition, while Decruck's Sonata, until Claude Delangle's (Professor of Saxophone at the Paris Conservatory) recording from 2002, remained relatively unknown.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ "Marcel Mule: Saxophonist and Teacher June 24, 1901 - December 19, 2001," *Dorn Publications*, <https://www.dornpub.com/saxophonejournal/marcelmule.html>.

⁴⁶ Cain, "Rediscovering Fernande Decruck," 27.

Conclusion

The similarities between these two pieces and the lives of Fernande Decruck and Paule Maurice are many. Decruck's *Sonate en ut# pour saxophone alto (ou alto) et orchestra* and Maurice's *Tableaux de Provence* share similar harmonic language, influences, and style. Among those similarities, the polytonality and modality of the works stand out. A similarity that could be explained by the fact that both composers studied harmony and assisted Jean Gallon at the Paris Conservatory. Like many composers of the first half of the twentieth century, Maurice and Decruck also showed interest and found inspiration in folk music and tradition.

Decruck and Maurice shared aspects of their personal lives as well. Each composer collaborated with their spouse in writing a pedagogical text. Their spouses Maurice Decruck and Pierre Lantier both played saxophone, and both couples knew Marcel Mule. Mule's premieres and recordings of the works written by Decruck and Maurice gave their compositions a major role in the classical saxophone repertoire. Like much of the repertoire written in that period, both the Sonata and *Tableaux de Provence* were dedicated to Mule. Fernande Decruck and Paule Maurice stand out as two noteworthy, female European composers of the first half of the twentieth century. Their contributions to the saxophone repertoire remain among those as important as any other.

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